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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001491

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV SA YM IR

SUBJECT: SAUDIS DEFENSE OF TERRITORY "JUSTIFIED" SAYS MEDIA, NEIGHBORS

REF: A. RIYADH 1478

1B. RIYADH 1470

1C. RIYADH 1396

1D. SANAA 1965

1E. SANAA 2030

1F. SANAA 2029

Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) News continues to trickle in regarding escalation of the conflict on the Saudi-Yemeni border, with indications the Saudis have already begun, or may be planning, ground operations in the region. Official statements from the SAG and its neighbors stress Saudi Arabia's right to defend its territory against incursions "strongly and firmly" and express strong solidarity with the Saudis in their fight against Houthi "aggressors." These strongly-worded statements coincide with increasingly incendiary rhetoric in the media, where local and foreign experts are pointing the finger at Iran and threatening "enemies of faith and Arab identity." The charged discussion surrounding the Houthi conflict has become one more front in the escalating war of words between Saudi Arabia and Iran (to be reported septel). END SUMMARY.

PRESS FANNING THE FLAMES

12. (U) Official SAG statements have stressed the defensive nature of the SAG's military operations, and straightforward news reporting has largely followed this line. However, accompanying photos and editorial treatment of events has been noticeably more incendiary, with the Iranian angle receiving significant play. Al-Watan newspaper quoted Lebanese and Egyptian "experts" commenting on Iran's role in the conflict, noting that "observers all agreed about the danger of Iranian agents messing around in the region. The front page of the November 7 Sharq Al-Awsat shows Saudi heavy artillery guns massed on the Yemeni border, while the November 5 edition of Al-Watan shows Prince Mohamed bin Nasr, Governor of Jizan province, paying his respects to "martyred" Saudi soldier Turki Al-Qahtani.

13. (U) In a November 6 editorial published in the Saudi Al-Jazirah newspaper titled "Houthists Are Digging Their Own Graves With Their Audacity" clearly accuses Iran of intervention. The writer calls the Houthis' actions "unforgivable" and cites "the fury raging in the heart of every Saudi" as events along the border unfold. "Saudi territories, which the Houthists, along with whoever is prompting them to commit such atrocities, must know and understand, are a red line that cannot be crossed or tampered

with," the writer observes, continuing, "this deplorable crime, which the Houthis have committed according to instructions and orders from the enemies of faith and Arab identity to serve their regional and religious objectives, will not be allowed to pass quietly."

¶4. (U) A November 5 editorial in Al-Watan challenges Iran even more directly: "Rebellious Houthi gangs in Yemen should know that playing with fire has a very dear price that small Iranian agents with sectarian expansion plans cannot shoulder. Those who want to bargain with the West to get a better deal for their nuclear armament and their political gains will not win."

IRAN'S ARABIC VOICE MUZZLED

¶5. (U) Following a meeting of Arab Information Ministers on November 3, managers of Arabsat and Nilesat, the two major Arabic-language satellite TV providers, announced that they would cease transmission of Iran's Arabic language Al-Alam TV. Al-Quds Al-Arabi quoted Arabsat management claiming they received complaints that Al-Alam featured programs and news that "ran counter to religious and political ethics." The channel has actively alleged Saudi support for Yemen's battle against the Houthis in the past.

SUNNI-SHIA ANGLE SECONDARY...FOR NOW

¶6. (U) For the time being, the Sunni-Shia dimension of the
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conflict is being downplayed as the SAG focuses on its legitimate defensive need to protect its borders. However, the more overt criticism of Iran on the editorial pages is spilling over into the blogosphere, where it is taking on an increasingly militant and sectarian tone. A comment on the Saudi Shiite website Al-Rasid said Saudi Arabia "opened the gates of hell" by attacking the Houthis, while blog Al-Saha suggested that Saudi Shiites, too, should be attacked.

COMMENT: IRAN WAGGING THE DOG?

¶7. (C) In recent conversations with contacts surrounding Yemen and Iran's alleged support for the Houthis, one theme has occurred again and again: that the Iranian government's domestic legitimacy suffered following the elections and the protests that followed, and that Iran has, since then, been carrying out an increasingly aggressive media campaign aimed at stoking Sunni-Shia tensions in the region and creating an internally unifying diversion. News reports regarding the Yemeni seizure of an Iranian vessel purportedly bringing arms to the Houthis (ref D) were viewed by many Saudis as the "smoking gun" that proved long-assumed Iranian support for the Houthi insurgency. This, combined with the recent war of words surrounding the Hajj (septel) and additional revelations surrounding the extent of Iran's nuclear activity has fed into the Saudi fear-- often bordering on paranoia-- of Iran's nefarious designs on the region.

¶8. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: On a nationalistic level, the Saudis' defense of their own territory from Iranian-backed rebels is readily justifiable; as long as they continued to present it that way, the SAG should be able to count on broad-based domestic and international support. However, the media and foreign officials are already beginning to make comments that risk aggravating sectarian tensions, and Iran's recent behavior regarding the Hajj has shown it is ready and willing to poke the bear. Saudi official restraint will be

necessary to ensure that tensions do not escalate further.
END COMMENT.

SMITH